Why is it important to study English Literature of the past in modern times?

In the words of George Santayana, ‘Those who do not remember the past are condemned to repeat it’. To take these words into account, we must take not only the events of the past, as dictated to us by those who won the battles and define history even now, we must also take the lived ideas and perspectives of the past, the individual experiences and the highs and lows of life, and this is exactly what literature of the past delivers. It reminds us all of the events and controversies of the era, and the most prominent example of this is the fin de siècle of the 19th Century, which brought literature balancing a hope for a better century and a rejection of the old ideals, as seen in War of the Worlds, as writer HG Wells takes an anti-imperialist standpoint, as well as a socialist one, encouraging empathy for ‘those witless souls that suffer our dominion’, and after a century of brutalism towards colonial subjects, and the Poor Laws which condemned many unfortunate people to workhouses and death, Wells provides hope to the reader that the future can be better, and that pain can be overcome, much as the Martians were overcome by microbes from Earth.

Literature of the past also challenges what we take for granted, and this is best demonstrated, I feel, by the contrast between Sue Townsend’s The Queen and I and Shakespeare’s Macbeth. The former was published in 1992, and the latter was put on stage in the early 17th century. Macbeth deals with the ambition of Macbeth and his wife, Lady Macbeth, which leads them to commit regicide so that Macbeth can become King of Scotland. Considering that the (Protestant) monarch of the time, James I, had recently suffered an attempt on his own life by a group of wealthy Catholics, it is clear that Shakespeare gives a ringing endorsement to the idea of the Divine Right of Kings – that is, that kings are granted the throne by God, and so their legitimacy is undeniable. As Macbeth is slain in the final scene of Macbeth, the audience should ultimately feel that any challenge to the King is futile, and all those who do so will suffer greatly, and some would argue that in Macbeth, God sends a swathe of miseries to Macbeth – mental illness, rebellion, visions, and his eventual defeat – as if his own ambition to become king and challenge God was that which led to his end. Comparatively, The Queen and I takes great joy in making fun of the monarchy, and pointing out how out of touch with the realities of modern Britain they are; the Queen is shocked by how long waiting times in hospitals are, and Charles realises he cannot keep a horse in his council house’s small back garden, and as an avid British republican, Townsend uses her sharp wit to state that even on a council estate, the monarchs are still wildly out of touch and hardly ‘of the people’. Arguably, the 300-year transition from Macbeth to The Queen and I shows a shift in rights – from the right of the monarch to remain unchallenged, to the right of the everyday citizen to free speech and to prod at the monarchy.

However, Shakespeare remains on the UK curriculum for one reason: he makes the intangible tangible. Great themes of the human condition: love, loss, death, ambition and more, are all made tactile and visualised through Shakespeare’s mastery of the English language. In Macbeth, he is able to describe worry and fear as having a mind ‘full of scorpions’, giving a physical representation to the stinging, deeply uncomfortable feeling of fear, that any audience can sympathise with. In this, and in many of his plays, he is able to portray the highest lord or monarch as still having a human heart, and allows every audience to empathise with nearly every character, and comprehend every complex emotion, and to be able to do that, and through language understand so intensively a society 300 years old, is marvellous, and an education in history in and of itself.

The reason that I pursue English literature as an A level subject (apart from merely just enjoying it) is because it is far more expansive than GCSE English literature. If we want to understand the past, we can’t simply stand around gawking at the so-called ‘greats’. John Berger, in Ways of Seeing, makes the case for most of the so-called ‘great artists’ being merely wealthy white men who just painted
their lives. In literature, this is certainly true also, and having the ‘right narrative’ (never challenging social norms or beliefs) lends a helping hand in this. Many Britons have heard of The Soldier by Rupert Brooke, but far fewer have heard of Wilfred Owen’s Anthem for Doomed Youth or Dulce et Decorum Est, and the reason being is that Rupert Brooke glorifies what many see as a righteous war, and he was wealthy and privately educated, and in being the status quo, he came to be regarded as one of the great poets of the past century. Yet I find Owen’s poetry far more satisfying, because it actually challenges our ideas. It makes us think, and that is why we should study literature of the past today.